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Forbidden Desires and Killer Sex Robots: Exploring the Limits of Posthuman Counter-Heteronormative Possibilities in Eloghosa Osunde's *Vagabonds!* (2022)

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Abstract

Over the decades, the ever-expanding discourse on posthumanism and its striking potentiality in interrogating the inelastic binaries embodied by humanism has fostered emerging dialogues on the complicated relationship between the human and the non-human. In the age of a proliferation of 'posts', posthumanism stands out as a beacon of stupefying multiplicities, overcoming Braidotti's (2013) nature-culture binary (p. 3). The proposed paper will trace the parallelisms that underscore the exclusionary politics of humanism and heteronormativity while simultaneously exploring the limits of posthuman counter-heteronormative possibilities via a critical reading of a short narrative in Eloghosa Osunde's novel-in-stories *Vagabonds!* (2022). Osunde's narrative seems to provide an unpalatable answer to Braidotti's (2013) question, "where does the posthuman condition leave humanity?" (p. 3) The choice for the paper's analytical study will shed light on what Braidotti (2013) has called the "inhuman(e) moments" of the posthuman predicament. (p. 9) The paper will reveal how Osunde's portrayal of a closeted gay man's ill-fated sexual intimacy with sex robots who have supposedly been imposed with the moniker of cis-male gay lovers provides an unsettling take on the posthuman fallout.

Keywords: Posthuman, Counter-Heteronormative, Binary, Homosexuality, Sex Robots.

Introduction:

Eloghosa Osunde's *Vagabonds!* (2022) is an electric compendium of short narratives that expunge Africa, specifically Nigeria, from the stronghold of a postcolonial hangover concerning contemporary discourse on queerness. The novel-in-stories presents a series of gripping narratives that reveal the subterranean queer undercurrents coursing through the homophobic cosmology of Nigeria. Osunde's characters hang around in darkness – hiding from

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the world outside and inside – as a survival tactic to elude criminalisation. Indeed, as one reads on, the cruel reality of queers in Nigeria appears to be as mystifying as Osunde's use of magical realism. In the prologue to the section of stories titled 'TATAFO (THE BILL)' Osunde (2022), or rather her omniscient and omnipresent narrator, the city spirit Èkó, directly addresses the readers: "Where were you on the thirteenth of January 2014, when that law was passed?" (p. 217) The date is significant. It is on this date that the Nigerian government enacted the infamous Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) which effectively criminalised homosexuality. Osunde's (2022) novel-in-stories explores the kind of lives that queer people from various strata of Nigerian society live in the aftermath of this law. Free love seems to be impossible for queer people as Èkó asks: "Can you imagine a Lagos where vagabonds could love each other in public?" (p. 218). The shape of Osunde's work is constantly shifting as we move from story to story. It is elusive, and in its elusiveness, it captures the endless expanse of Osunde's vision. In an interview with Logan February (2022), Osunde talked of how the structure (or lack thereof) reflects the playfulness of the narratives,

> I don't think of *Vagabonds!* as a novel exactly. I do think of it as a book but also a trampoline, an endless site of possibilities, a playground, a container - a place where I fit together all the things I was interested in at the time and got to write as the chief conveyor of a particular world. It's a place of imagination and beauty and storage and play. (p. 31)

From its very outset, the author offers the readers a detailed etymology of the word 'vagabond' and its different connotations specific to the Nigerian context. Existing in the borders and masquerading as ideal citizens, 'vagabonds' are those whose integration into mainstream society is an impossibility. In the third definition of 'vagabond' Osunde (2022) writes of the Nigerian definition of the word in noun form: "In the states of Bauchi, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara, 'any male person who dresses or is attired in the fashion of a woman in a public place or who practices sodomy as a means of livelihood or as a profession' is a vagabond" (p. 2). The same is applicable for women as well: "In the states of Kano and Katsina, 'any female person who dresses or is attired in the fashion of a man in a public place' is a vagabond." (p. 2) "In other words," Osunde (2022) continues to write, "hunted," "wanted," "kept secret," "invisible, hypervisible, threat, trouble", and there are "punishments" reserved for such behaviour. (p. 2) In addition to Osunde's (2022) definitions of 'vagabonds' there is also a note on the Nigerian connotations of "Gross Indecency (n)" (p. 2), one of which refers to homosexual acts: "…a person commits an act of gross indecency by 'committing any sexual offence against the normal or usual standards of behavior.'" (p. 2) However, despite such ironclad laws against homosexuality, there are still certain chinks in the legal fabric of Nigeria. Such forbidden sexual acts, if discovered, are "sometimes forgivable" if those involved wield political power, but this part of the law, Osunde (2022) writes in parenthesis, is "*written in invisible ink.*" (p. 3) This paper takes a close look at the story 'WITCHING HOURS/ THEY WILL NOT DEPART FROM IT – December 32, 20XX', specifically its sub story '00:50 a.m.', through an exploration of the queer and posthuman entanglements present in it.

Queer and Posthuman Entanglements

The deployment of posthuman elements in Osunde's work is a testament to the growing entanglement between what has so far been described as queer and the definitions of what is posthuman. In this interesting pairing of the queer and the posthuman that categories of what constitutes the human and the non-human, normative and non-normative, natural and unnatural/artificial are (in)conveniently blurred thereby allowing a broader interpretative playing field where established ontological supremacies are challenged. Like the queer, the posthuman threatens established status quo by directly shattering the arbitrary hierarchisation where the normative body is situated at the apex. Claire Henry puts it, both the queer and the

posthuman overthrow the "structures of knowledge and power" (p. 170) that have defined the human as a "white heterosexual man." (MacCormack, 2009, p. 111) Wolfe purported that posthumanism dismantles humanist ideas of anthropocentrism where man is at the centre of everything. In a similar vein of thought, Rosi Braidotti (2013) in her work *The Posthuman* postulates how a posthumanist approach entails a necessary de-centring of man, (p. 2) and by extension, the de-centring of master narratives. In leading to a breakdown of essentialist categories, the posthuman facilitates a "non-dualistic understanding of nature-culture interaction" (p. 3): "The boundaries between the categories of the natural and the cultural have been displaced and to a large extent blurred by the effects of scientific and technological advances." (p. 3) In tracing the disruptive potential of the queer and posthuman analytical lenses, MacCormack (2009) writes:

> Posthuman life collapses demarcated entities and refuses the compulsion to know in order to master rather than create. The creations of connections – life as relation not dividuation – is posthuman living. Desire is, put most simply, the need to create connections with other things, not to have or know but collapse the self with other(s). In this sense posthumanism is a form of queer desire, or queer "life." (p. 113)

A very crucial symbol of the posthuman condition is the figure of the cyborg. Donna J. Haraway (2007) in her influential essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto' defines the cyborg as a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism," (p. 65) using it as a metaphor to explain the breakdown of barriers between the human and machine, human and animal, and the physical and non-physical. As such, the cyborg becomes a potent metaphor concretising the dissolvable binaries of gender. While such an interpretation of the figure of the cyborg has gained traction over time, Ross (2023) views this tendency as Western culture's compulsion "inscribe and control human bodies and behaviours in some way." (pp. 225-226) This brings us to view the cyborg as a blank space for critics to read into the possible outcomes of this queer hybridity and the extent to which it could impact life as we have known it thus far. Haraway (2007) seems to be sceptical of this new chapter of humanity:

> The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. (p. 68)

This paper doesn't deal with cyborgs, but with sex robots. It is in the way in which the relationship between a human and a machine (the sex robot) has been portrayed that resonates deeply with Haraway's theorisation of the cyborg. It is as Cassidy (2016) puts it, the "machine-human intimacies of men and dolls bring to life parts of Haraway's vision." (p. 211) Henderson (2015) in his queer posthumanist reading of the romance/sci-fi movie *Her* (2013) postulates that in its refusal to comply with rigidified notions of the axial markers of gender, sex, and sexuality, a posthuman shows us more open ways of being. (p. 12) In opening up the possibility of non-normative sexualities lies posthuman's queer potential as a "politically subversive lifestyle" (p. 19). Gatens (1996) noted that the posthuman performance of deviant sexualities has led to the (re)flourishing of "dominant concepts", of not just the body, but also of sexuality, gender, and a host of other identities. (p. 59) This is to some extent the reality of what is observed in Osunde's narrative, but not the entire truth.

Sex with Robots

That human beings are now engaging comfortably in synthetic relationships is not a novel situation. Mankind has a long history of using machines for sexual pleasure. Even before the invention of sex toys and the more advanced technology involved in the creation of sex dolls

and sex robots, dildos from Paleolithic times have been unearthed, and uses of dildos were also discovered in the 1800s to treat hysteria. (Smith and Moran, 2022) Over time, they were enhanced with mechanical and now electrical vibration. Smith and Moran (2022) further state that "with the development of interactive AI packaged in realistic skin and features, the sex robot has evolved into a 'mechanical bride.'" (p. 218) However, according to them, ethical considerations loom large since sexuality is an integral aspect of all civilisations, and technology's impact on sexuality could potentially "modify the course of cultural chang.e" (p. 218)

David Levy in his work *The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships: LOVE+SEX WITH ROBOTS* (2007) traces the significant technological developments that have taken place to foster a growing relationship between humans and robots. Levy (2008) writes of how dolls, especially the iconic Barbie doll, influenced and inspired the need to make sex dolls and sex robots to closely resemble actual human beings. When the technology for human-robot companionship was still in its formative stages, robot manufacturing companies that specialised in making robotic pets noticed that they sell better when they look like real pets. That way they "stimulate the experience of traditional pet ownership" that influenced the owners' "emotional attachment to them." (pp. 14-15) Down the line, recent modern advancements in artificially intelligent sex robot technology have ensured that they are no longer seen as machines, but as good companions.

Levy (2008) mentions certain qualities are necessary in a sex robot or a sex doll to be suitable companions to humans. The ability to communicate through language is an important feature that people seeking synthetic companionship look forward to. (p. 19) This serves the purpose of making sex robots seem more human-like which enables people to mimic a relationship with another human being. It is for this reason that the sex robots' capability to recognise "human emotional cues and moods" has become essential for a satisfactory relationship with the human. (p. 124) This feature in a sex robot meets the emotional needs of the user and ensures that it is at all time able to recalibrate its responses in accordance with the emotional state of the user. It would appear that sex robots are required to serve both the emotional and sexual needs of the user.

In a poll conducted by Scheutz and Arnold (2016) where, using the Amazon Mechanical Turk system, 100 men and women had to place their opinion on the topic of sex robots. 86% of the people taking the poll expected that the robots were designed to satisfy sexual desire, while 11% expected the robots to have feelings. (Coursey et al, 2019) While robots will indeed change the way in which humans perceive love and relationships, the availability of robots for sex and companionship will "expand their horizons of love and sex, learning, experimenting, and enjoying new forms of relationship that will be made possible, pleasurable, and satisfying through the development of highly sophisticated humanoid robots." (Levy, 2008, p. 22)

Forbidden Desires and Killer Sex Robots

In the sub story titled '00:50 a.m.', Brainbox, a spirit/entity/being responsible for Nigeria's tech landscape, is shown to be colluding with the devil in developing its technological prowess. What does it say about Osunde's stance regarding the technological leaps in the 21st century? The answer, provided by the narrative, is not very appealing. In the story Osunde (2022) portrays a very powerful politician, known mostly for handing out punishments to the queer citizens of Nigeria, taking part in sexual acts with two male sex robots whom he addresses as "the boys." (p. 271) The story captures the hypocrisy of Nigerian society where rich people with political influence get to enjoy the very same acts for which other Nigerian citizens are stigmatised and criminalised. In a brief narrative that spans for two and a half pages, Osunde (2022) metes out poetic justice through a swift gesture of divine (technological) intervention. The story takes the readers directly into the other side of Nigeria where the posthuman turn has

allowed people to partake in deviant sexuality, provided they have the political and monetary power to afford sex robots:

> The politician had gotten the boys for himself as a sixtieth birthday present-commissioned Brainbox to do it. They came back, made to his exact specifications: Tall, thin, beautiful fingers, long eyelashes, able to do exercises, waterproof, strong necks, great mouths, and yes, tight. But I don't just want a hole, I want a boy with a voice. Almost real, you know? Almost real. Brainbox being himself, it was done in no time. (p. 271)

It is indeed very interesting to make a note of how the politician categorically specifies certain features or traits that the "boys" must have. In the process of stating his preferences, the politician is inadvertently taking part in the inscription of gender identity onto the sex robots. As customisable non-human entities, the sex robots are in a way being humanised as they are being made with human characteristics that aim to make them "[a]lmost real" (p. 271) They are both cis-male, "boys," (p. 271) which tells us about the preferred age range of the politician and it is alarming given that it refers to them being under the legal age for sex. They are required to be aesthetically appealing as well – they must be tall and thin with feminine features like graceful fingers and luscious eye lashes. Mere looks would not suffice – the sex robots must also be impressive in their functionality in addition to their aesthetics. In order to be the perfect companions of the politician, the boys must be able to perform exercises and they must be waterproof so that they can join the politician in his swimming sessions. Apart from being suitable companions for the politician's leisure time activities, they have to be tailored for their primary function - sex.

While such demands might seem impossible, robotic technology has advanced by leaps and bounds to ensure that robots adapt to the "needs and desires of their human partners." (Levy, 2007, p. 17) Despite the significant progress in technology, there is a constant emphasis on the robots being made to *feel* real or life like. This draws attention to the politician's yearning for an actual human companion that the socio-cultural make-up of his country and his political position cannot allow. Accompanied with this need for human connection and warmth, there is a desire to be acknowledged, accepted and wanted by the sex robots who speak in a human voice. What is problematic in this episode is the issue of consent since the sex robots, or "boys", are in all probability underage. A question arises: do sex robots have the ability to give consent? Mostly no because they are programmed to please, and in this scenario, given that it is mimicking actual human relationships, the fact that the robots represent underage boys makes it a matter of concern. Sex robots, then, apart from providing human-like companionship, also reinforces the extant troublesome binaries:

> The significant risk of sex robots is not, as some robot ethicists suggest, that they will alter the politics of sex and desire, but rather, that they will further inscribe the hegemony of exploitative heteronormativity that is part and parcel of the hegemonic "genre" of the human, along with all of the harmful gender and racial dynamics that this genre demands. (DeFalco, 2023, p. 28)

As the narrative progresses, a complex psychological angle emerges. The politician, while yearning for the sex robots to feel "almost real," (p. 271) simultaneously dismisses the uncomfortable truth that he is gay. There's a certain amount of psychological gymnastics involved as the politician tries to justify to himself that he is not gay. This process is very important because as his day time job is that of penalising homosexuals, he needs to keep his conscience clear. Thus, there is a constant psychological effort to dismiss his sexual acts with the sex robots as merely a mechanical exercise. The politician is clearly in denial of his sexual identity,

> There was no harm in it, right? Since the politician couldn't sleep with real guys - he swears to God it's because he hates real ones who are *like that*, but really he just doesn't want to have to look at them after what he's said on television, in interviews – pretend boys would do. Pretend boys couldn't *turn you into anything*; they're not real so they can't make you *like that*, where *like that* means a common…vagabond. Even if they could - and you did a mad thing like fall in love with them - they wouldn't be *able* to tell anyone. That's what robots were: obedient machines. (pp. 271-272)

According to the twisted logic of the politician, since the sex robots are not gay, that is, they do not have a sexual identity of their own but are made to perform according to the preference of the user, he himself cannot be gay. There is a deliberate attempt on the part of the politician to create a divide between the sexual act and the sexual identity. He even views his proclivity not as a natural tendency, but as something that rich people can afford to do. This radical stance of divorcing himself from reality shows that he is in denial. Consequently, the counter-heteronormative potential of posthumanism falls short since the user is reifying the human-nonhuman binary by drawing attention to the fact that having sex with male robots cannot make one gay. As such, the politician's logic is fallacious and this convoluted logic is designed to absolve him of his crime of being gay in Nigeria - the same crime for which he hands out grave justice during his day time charade as a virtuous straight politician:

> He considered himself a radical: people shook his hands in the streets every single day for standing for something, for doing *the right thing*, for insisting that vagabonds be taken down, jailed the moment they were found. There were people behind bars in his name, bodies in the ground in his name because they'd fallen on the wrong side of the appropriate. That was the right thing to do…right? That's what God would want. (pp. 272-273)

Osunde (2022) dwells upon two contradictions in the narrative – the first one being the politician's protection of a fake sexual identity through twisted justification, and the second one being his desire for a "real" sexual and emotional bonding through his sex robots. The robots, having skin-like touch technology, resembles the softness and vulnerabilities of human beings: "He like their exhaustibility; it felt almost human. When they touched him like this, their full focus on every inch of skin, he felt loved. Was that insane?" (p. 272) The sex robots make him feel loved, yet the baseness of their primary purpose, sex, comes as a sharp contrast to the recurrent need for emotional fulfilment. Even as tenderness comes over him, the politician dismisses them as mere "obedient machines." (p. 272) It appears that the politician is caught in two very serious dilemmas, his most immediate one being where the metallic smell emanating from the sex robots keep coming in the way of his fantasy of engaging in sex with a human being: "He was trying to focus on what they were doing to him, how good it felt, but he could smell something familiar - wet and metallic - and it kept sending him back into his head." (p. 272)

The politician could only temporarily enjoy this electric, battery-powered fantasy as the sex robots, both in low charge, malfunction in mid-act, one ripping off his nipple and the other castrating him. Following this the politician could no longer smell the metallic scent of the sex robots - he could only hear the "crunch" (p. 273) of his nipple and penis being torn off, and the "red smell" (p. 272) of his own blood till he "went out with pain between his ears and loud screams from the house like a thousand hyenas cackling." (p. 272) The irony of the ending plays out in perfect harmony at par with poetic justice - the judge that metes out justice during the day gets appropriately judged via divine intervention in darkness for committing those same acts.

Conclusion

Throughout the story, there is the lingering sense of a dark and ominous foreboding looming large over the politician and his two boys. Osunde's stance regarding the human-nonhuman entanglements is something worth contemplating. Bringing both the queer and posthuman discourses into a dialogue through a bloody ending, Osunde calls into question the counter-heteronormative potential of posthumanism. Sex robots, built for comfort, turn into merciless killers when they malfunction. Oblivious to the social circumstances in which they were made to perform homosexual acts, they mete out a severe and gory punishment in a moment of supreme irony. The finality of Osunde's take on the human-machine relationship is a grim echo of Braidotti's anticipation of the inhumanity of the posthuman turn. The castration performed by the sex robots underscores the dangers of using man-made technology to override man-made laws, especially in Osunde's cosmology where an unworldly karmic equation is at play.

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